

CHAPTER 7

A Baroque Poet: Stefán Ólafsson of Vallanes

As we have noted, Magnús Ólafsson and Ólafur Einarsson of Kirkjubær, the father of Stefán, were good friends during their student years in Copenhagen. Stefán certainly knew Magnús's poetry and to some extent followed in his footsteps. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Stefán and Hallgrímur Pétursson were personally acquainted though they no doubt knew of each other.¹ One person with links to both poets is Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson. Stefán probably began studying at Skálholt cathedral school in 1638 or 1639, graduating in 1642 and serving as bishop's secretary over the following winter before setting out for Copenhagen to continue his studies (Jón Þorkelsson 1886a, xxx). While in Denmark Stefán corresponded with Brynjólfur in Latin and also with Bjarni Gissurarson (1621–1712), his cousin, who was then at the Skálholt school “gathering tiny flowers in the gardens of learning and graceful goddesses, which are now so well cultivated in the south of Iceland that their like are not to be found anywhere. I mean Skálholt, where good fortune has gifted them a great genius who is wiser and more humane than anyone

1. Jón Marteinsson (d. 1771) claimed that Stefán and Hallgrímur had met at the Alþingi and tired themselves out with their poetry and drinking. So exuberant was their verse making that shot glasses were said to have danced on the table for no apparent reason. Brynjólfur Sveinsson eventually intervened to bring this magic-making to an end (Jón Þorkelsson 1886a, lxxviii–lxxix).

in this present age.”² These words reveal the extent of Stefán’s admiration for Bishop Brynjólfur and his work at Skálholt. They were written in 1644, at a time when Brynjólfur was being criticized for having ordained Hallgrímur Pétursson as a pastor: “so fatæka audvirdelega skepnu” [such a poor and shameful creature] (Jón Samsonarson 1971, 87). Shortly afterwards Stefán had the opportunity to travel to France to introduce and explain old northern literature to scholars there, but nothing came of the venture. Extant letters reveal that though Stefán was eager to make the journey he was worried about his parents’ reaction to the plan and was also keen to canvass Bishop Brynjólfur’s opinion. The bishop appears to have encouraged Stefán’s parents to allow their son to make the journey, and was himself eager for Stefán to make a name for himself abroad. However, the Paris expedition never took place, apparently because Stefán’s prospective scholarly hosts lost interest in the project. Jón Þorkelsson (1886a, xlviii–xlix) claims that the bishop had advised repeatedly against the whole enterprise, and notes the absence of any extant correspondence from Stefán to Brynjólfur after Stefán’s return to Iceland from Denmark, which could suggest a cooling in their relations (*ibid.*, li). However, it has recently been suggested that Jón’s view is based on his mistranslation of a key source (Sigríður Magnúsdóttir 2008, 233–245). We know nothing of contacts between Stefán and Bishop Brynjólfur in later life, though there were family links as their respective wives were first cousins.

Stefán was born into a clerical family at Kirkjubær in Hróarstunga in 1618 or 1619.³ Not only had his father and grandfather been pastors and respected poets, but there are also extant manuscripts containing poetry ascribed to his mother, Kristín Stefánsdóttir.⁴ It was thus only to be expected that Stefán would receive a good education and then find a suitable official position, and so it proved. It will also have seemed inevitable that someone from his station in life would

2. safna smáblómum í þeim görðum menta og þökkagýðjanna, sem nú eru svo vel ræktaðir í suðurhluta Íslands að slíkir finnast hvergi. Eg á við Skálholt, sem hamingjan hefur gefið þennan mikla snilling, sem nú á þessum mannsaldri er hverjum fróðari og mannúðarfyllri (Jón Þorkelsson 1886a, xl).

3. Jón Samsonarson (1986, 173) has shown that Stefán must have been born between 30 August 1618 and 28 August 1619.

4. The manuscripts are ÍB 380 8vo and Lbs 1485 8vo; see also Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 194 and 264–266.

write poetry, and so he seems to have done from his early days, as an extant booklet containing his youthful compositions confirms (AM 439 12mo). While studying in Copenhagen Stefán translated *Völuspá* and part of *Snorra Edda* into Latin. As already noted these scholarly initiatives led to the invitation to travel to France. In the event, after five years in Copenhagen he returned to Iceland in 1648, where he was soon appointed to be pastor at Vallanes, following the death of the incumbent.⁵ All the evidence suggests that Stefán was a good-humored man until the age of forty (as we see in his poem “Svanasöngur” [Swan song]); we then find him requesting that an assistant pastor be appointed because of his own health problems, and this arrangement continued until his death in 1688. Jón Þorkelsson describes the Vallanes poet in this way:

Stefán Ólafsson was a man of average height but with a robust and manly physique, aristocratic in appearance and energetic in his youth. He was very good-humored and somewhat given to sarcasm early in his life, a horseman and rider, elegantly attired, and in every respect had the bearing of the finest aristocrat. He was an excellent singer, with a fine voice, enjoyed a glass, liked his pipe, as was the fashion of gentlemen at that time. For almost the last thirty years of his life, from about 1659, he suffered from a leg affliction and depression; he grew sluggish and obese.⁶

Early Reception

Jón Halldórsson of Hítardalur said of Stefán that he was “one of the most intelligent poets, second only to séra Hallgrímur Pétursson, especially in his comic verse; something of a joker as a young man,

5. Finnur Jónsson was the pastor at Vallanes before Stefán. He was the nephew of Ormur Vigfússon of the Vestmannaeyjar, to whom years later Hallgrímur would dedicate a poem of greetings.

6. Stefán Ólafsson var meðalmaður að hæð, en þrekinn og karlmenni að burðum, höfðinglegur á svip og vasklegur á velli á yngri árum. Hann var gleðimaður mikill og gemsfullur nokkuð svo framan af, hestamaður og reiðmaður hinn mesti, glæsimaður í klæðaburði og hélt sig að öllu hið höfðinglegasta. Hann var fyrirtaks söngmaður og raddmaður mikill, þótti gott í staupin[u] og var tóbaksmaður eins og títt var heldri mönnum á þeirri öld. Nálega þrjátíu hin síðustu ár æfi sinnar eða frá hérumbil 1659 var hann þjáður af fótaveiki og geðveiki; varð hann þá feitur og líkamapungur (Jón Þorkelsson 1886a, lxiv).

he was also gifted, well-educated and good-humored.”⁷ It is noteworthy that Jón ranks Stefán next to Hallgrímur and particularly admires his comic pieces, and it is no surprise that he was regarded as “something of a joker.” It is not difficult to imagine that in a period of religious and moral orthodoxy Stefán may have been regarded by some as rather too colorful a figure; much of the verse ascribed to him is both ironic and salacious. Páll Vídalín discusses Stefán in his list of Icelandic authors, drawing attention to the scholarly work undertaken during his student years in Copenhagen. Stefán’s translation of Kingo’s hymns dates from later in his life, but is criticized for following the original text too rigidly. Most of Stefán’s hymns are deemed to be “mjög þokkafullir” [very graceful] (Páll Vídalín 1985, 124) but more difficult to understand than hymns should be because the author has striven to reproduce “of erfiðum bragarháttum og rímsnilld þeirra” [their overly complex metrics and ingenuity of rhyme] (*ibid.*). Of Stefán’s numerous secular pieces Páll considers some to be “orðhvatari” [livelier] than was appropriate for a cleric (Páll Vídalín 1985, 125). Páll claims that Stefán’s “Sigurðar ríma” was modelled on Magnús of Laufás’s “Flateyjarríma,” that “Oddsbragur” was a metrical tour de force, and that Stefán himself had developed a new meter.

In his ecclesiastical history Bishop Finnur Jónsson describes Stefán as a “learned man and a most gifted poet, especially in comic verse, so that by some he is known, not undeservedly, as the Horace of Iceland.”⁸ Stefán certainly translated Horatian verse into Icelandic. Horace was one of the most popular Roman poets during the baroque era and many writers translated or imitated his verse. There are, for example, instances of well-regarded German neo-Latin poets being known as “the Christian Horace” [christlicher Horaz] or “the German Horace” [deutscher Horaz] (Hoffmeister 1987, 51 and 143).

Though Stefán Ólafsson’s contemporaries and the following

7. eitt hið snotrasta skáld, sem næst gengur sr. Hallgrími Péturssyni, helst í hans gamankvæðum; þótti stundum nógu gamansamur á æskuárunum, annars mikill gáfumaður, vellærður, glaðsinnaður (*Prestasögurnar*, Lbs 174–175 4to, 21v; see Jón Þorkelsson 1886a, lxv).

8. vir doctus et poëta felicissimus, præsetim si de ludicris pangendum esset, ita ut non immerito a quibusdam Islandiæ Horatius nuncupetur (*Hist. Eccl. Isl.* III, 560).

generation acknowledged his achievements as a poet there was also a sense that he never made the fullest use of his talents. Though he composed poetry appropriate to his position and though his original and translated hymns and Latin pieces were widely circulated, early critics were agreed that they did not represent his best work. Páll Vídalín sees Stefán's command of form and interest in complex meters as both a strength and a weakness, and suggests that he is at his best in secular poetry. Hymns required a plainer style and more neutral vocabulary, and everyone recognized that Hallgrímur Pétursson had a special gift for such writing. Stefán Ólafsson's compositions exhibit great variety. He explores different genres, wrestles with many kinds of meter, and also undertakes a good deal of translating. In Stefán's day a poet was allowed to make use of all other texts as he saw fit; to translate, imitate or recycle their ideas. It is probably for this reason that his translations have often been thought of as original compositions. The relationship between those original works and his translations deserves more detailed analysis than can be attempted here. Yet because all the works are so closely linked, the translations will not be treated separately; each poetic genre will be dealt with in turn, with original and translated works discussed together. The chronology of Stefán's poems will not be considered, not least because most of his verse is virtually impossible to date. The social function of Stefán's poetry certainly merits attention, as does the difference between official and unofficial poetry at this time. The following discussion will address all these issues.

Neo-Latin Verse

Together with Magnús Ólafsson, Stefán was one of a very small group of Icelandic poets who composed works in neo-Latin.⁹ These compositions survive in an autograph manuscript, Bodleian

9. Latin verse written by some thirty-five Icelandic authors is preserved in seventeenth-century manuscripts and printed books. Prominent among the poets are Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned, Guðmundur Einarsson of Staðastaður, the schoolmaster Runólfur Jónsson, séra Sveinn Jónsson, séra Páll Hallsson, Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson and séra Þorsteinn Björnsson of Útskálar (Sigurður Pétursson 1995, 117–118).

MS 67 4to in Oxford (Jón Þorkelsson 1886b, 366ff.). Stefán seems to have achieved a good grasp of Latin while still young and composed his first poem in the language when he graduated from the cathedral school at Skálholt; he sent to a certain Guðmundur Jónsson two Latin pieces, one in Sapphic meter and the other an elegy (ibid., 367–370). Though he produced relatively few neo-Latin works, they seem to have been composed at significant moments during his life. One such piece is an eight-line poem in praise of the Danish island of Samsø, written in Copenhagen on 20 March 1647 (ibid., 390). Stefán's poem may have been composed for a particular (but no longer identifiable) occasion. It certainly belongs to the genre of encomiastic poems relating to particular urban or rural locations, even though it is much shorter than similar pieces that were popular during the baroque period. The Samsø poem was composed some decades before Kingo produced his main descriptive pieces, among them a depiction of the same island, "Samsøs korte beskrivelse" [A short description of Samsø] (Kingo 1975, 2:199–213).¹⁰ Latin verse is generally regarded as official poetry, composed in accordance with established rules, bearing witness to the poet's learning, and with luck helping him to achieve social advancement. Stefán's poetry certainly helped him in this respect. Yet it is his translations from Latin that make him a pioneering figure; he seems to have been the first Icelandic poet to translate poems by classical authors into his native language.

European pioneers of the new art poetry regarded translating as a worthwhile activity for a poet. The German writer Martin Opitz had translated a French court play into German (*Die Schöfferey von der Nimfen Hercinie* 1630) and expressed the hope in his preface that other poets would follow his example. Minna Skafta Jensen has shown that the Danish-German poet Zacharias Lund (1608–1667) did just that, translating works from French, Italian and Greek into German and Latin, and others from German into Latin and vice versa (Skafta Jensen 2002, 13).

Stefán Ólafsson began by translating Horace's *Rectius vives*,¹¹

10. Kingo's poem is 400 lines in length.

11. In his 1991 University of Iceland B.A. dissertation Kristján B. Jónasson discusses Stefán's translations of works by classical writers.

followed by his translation or imitation of the fifth poem in Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* (Ringler 1966, 20–22), to which he assigned the title “Um þá fyrri og þessa öld” [Of the former and present age] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885 I, 297–299). So convincing was his Icelandic adaptation of the Latin text (Etna becomes Hekla, silk becomes wool) that for a long time people regarded the work as an original composition (*ibid.*).¹² Stefán also translated verses from Virgil's *Georgics* (III 84–88) that have acquired the Icelandic title “Utmálun hins vænsta reiðhests” [A description of the finest saddle horse]. Jón Samsonarson has argued that Stefán's *hestavísur* [horse verses] were inspired and influenced by Virgil's poetry:

[. . .] it seems by no means improbable that it was Stefán's knowledge of Virgil which incited him to make Icelandic horses a subject for his poetry, and that the *Georgica* provided him with a pattern for the typical fine steed described in verse by him and his successors. (Jón Samsonarson 1986, 176)

Verses about horses may have been composed in the east of Iceland before Stefán's time, but he is regarded as the first writer to have established the horse as a worthy subject for poetry and *hestavísur* as a distinct poetic genre. Thus earlier verse served as Stefán's model as he sought to rejuvenate and amplify the Icelandic language, a priority also recognized by poets in Europe at this time. Stefán's *hestavísur* and his translations from Latin can be thought of as semi-official poetry. While there was never any question of these works being printed, they would have circulated in manuscript among friends, family and scholars, enhancing Stefán's reputation as a poet as they did so (see Kristján B. Jónasson 1991, 11).

Occasional Poems and Verse Epistles

Stefán Ólafsson's verse epistles may be counted among his occasional poetry. Such compositions, popular in Europe at this time, served as a kind of newsletter (see, for example, “Bindebreve” in

12. Richard Ringler (1966) has shown that Stefán's poem derives from Boethius, that Boethius himself was much influenced by Virgil, and that Stefán may well have realized this and drawn directly on the same Virgilian lines used by Boethius (Ringler 1966, 22).

Anders Bording 1984, 62–67 and “Lykønskingsdigte til forskellige lejligheder, rimbreve og lignende” [Congratulatory poems for different occasions, verse epistles and similar works] in Thomas Kingo 1975, 1:303–313). As we have already noted, Stefán composed his verse epistles in both Latin and Icelandic, as with those addressed to Eiríkur Ketilsson, pastor at Vallanes 1636–1647. Many of these works were prompted by some special occasion or circumstance, such as expressing thanks for a gift received, and they often include good wishes or congratulations. Stefán’s verse letters do not always make for easy reading, with the poet sometimes using *dróttkvætt* meter and *sléttubönd* quatrains.¹³ Yet in them we find vivid images of daily life, as in lines sent to Árni Jónsson in 1639:

Þú Árni gleymir öllum leik,
einninn fræða góðum söng,
meðan tóbaks römmum reyk
þú rennir um nasa liðug göng.
(Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:1)

[Árni, you shun all sport,
alone with a good learned song;
while pungent tobacco smoke
plays around your nasal passage.]

Verse epistles from his school days tell of tobacco, horses, women, and of the pleasures of receiving such poems. It is thus difficult to regard them as “official” poetry. The following stanza touches on the amorous reputation of Eiríkur Ólafsson, Stefán’s brother, during his student years at Skálholt:

Þessi hinn fróði fleina grér,
falur af amorshótum,
kvennagóður kallast hér,
hann kemur í hljóði við þær sér.
(Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:22)

13. *Sléttubönd* verses were composed in such a way that they make sense whether read forwards or backwards.

[This learned scholar of arrows,
effusive with love-gestures,
a lady's man is called here,
creeps up quietly by their side.]

There was certainly a pretext for these lines, as Eiríkur had fathered an illegitimate son called Halldór at some point before or around 1640 (the young man went abroad to study in 1661). Stefán's verses to "litli Dóri" [little Dóri] must have been addressed to the boy and have accompanied a verse epistle to Stefán's sister Kristín in AM 439 12mo (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:25–26). The text includes news from home and good wishes.

Like most of his contemporaries Stefán certainly composed occasional verse, though apparently not as many official pieces as Hallgrímur Pétursson. He produced semi-official epistles and poems that treat a variety of daily events. Official poems are addressed to the Danish merchant Jørgen Kem, including a wedding poem and a *propemptikon*, a lyric expression of good wishes for a forthcoming journey (see Margrét Eggertsdóttir 1996a, 94–97). Both pieces are composed in *dróttkvætt* meter and deploy traditional Icelandic poetic language. In his metrical choices Stefán was following the example of Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás who, as we have seen, once presented a *drápa* to the Danish Chancellor.

Stefán sent a poem to the daughter of the district magistrate Gísli Magnússon (Vísi-Gísli), a friend from his student years; this was "Nýársgjöf Guðríðar litlu Gísladóttur" [A New Year's gift for little Guðríður Gísladóttir]. The verses offer advice in Eddic meter (*ljúflingslag*, "the meter of the elves," as it is called in the poem), in which Stefán states that he has neither gold nor jewels for Guðríður but just a short poem. From the variety of contemporary advice poems we can identify the virtues that were thought appropriate for a woman to cultivate. Stefán's poem confirms that if readers/listeners look in the mirror and are content with what they see, they should be able to avoid the kind of bad behavior that might threaten those good looks. Any women gazing enviously on their more beautiful contemporaries should make sure that they live more exemplary Christian lives, thereby helping to improve their own appearance. Little Guðríður Gísladóttir was only two years old

when the poem was composed, but in the fullness of time she would become the wife of the Bishop of Skálholt. As noted earlier the poem was called “Nýársgjöf,” pointing perhaps to some festive occasion during which the poem was presented to Guðríður’s parents. The poet or a suitable substitute could well have been present to recite the lines to the assembled guests.

Stefán appears not to have composed many commemorative poems. Lbs 450 8vo attributes to him “Raunaljóð ort um afgang sonar síra Eiríks Ólafssonar” [Elegy composed on the death of séra Eiríkur Ólafsson’s son] (Kristinn E. Andrússon 1928, 418). Another such poem attributed to Stefán can be found in Lbs 2095 8vo.¹⁴ It was composed in memory of Þrúður Þorleifsdóttir from Hlíðarendi, who died in 1658, according to an appendix to the earliest *Vatnsfjarðarannáll* [Vatnsfjörður annal], which also mentions that Stefán Ólafsson injured his leg in the same year (*Annálar* 1400–1800, 3:84–86). Þrúður was the wife of the magistrate Gísli Magnússon and mother of Guðríður Gísladóttir. In the poem Stefán deploys the same simile (from Psalm 103) that Hallgrímur Pétursson uses to depict the unpredictability of death, by referring to the “litfögru grasi” [beautiful grass] and lilies of the field that flourish today but which “burt er á morgun svipt” [are snatched away tomorrow]. The focus then falls on a single lily in the Savior’s field that retained its beauty until the last moment. Praise for the deceased then follows and images of transience give way to praise for the flower that grew “af eðla rótum ættar” [from a noble family’s roots]. The final section concludes by noting that Þrúður died while still “í besta blóma” [in full bloom]. In this way ideas of evanescence and sorrow find brief expression, with the world described as being as slippery as ice, before consolation takes over with the recognition that the deceased Þrúður Þorleifsdóttir now graces the gardens of Paradise. Not only is she reunited with her ancestors but also with those exemplary women who were her biblical predecessors, all of whom are named. Solace lies ultimately in contemplating reunion in the next world; until then Þrúður’s husband and children are urged to live life to the full, thanking God equally for the blessings and trials that they experience along the way.

14. I am grateful to Þórunn Sigurðardóttir for drawing my attention to this poem.

It is clear that Stefán benefited little in terms of self-advancement from his occasional poems; he is content to address them to his closest friends. Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás, Hallgrímur Pétursson and Bjarni Gissurarson were rather more prolific as poets of commemorative verse and other occasional pieces.

Christian Poetry

Hymns are certainly part of seventeenth-century official poetry, and they feature more extensively in Stefán Ólafsson's output than editions of his works might lead us to suppose. From early on hymns by other poets, not least Hallgrímur Pétursson, seem to have overshadowed Stefán's own compositions. There is in fact considerable uncertainty as to which pieces are attributable to Stefán, and such questions have been little examined in recent times. Kristinn E. Andrésson's unpublished master's thesis on the preservation of Stefán's poetry addresses these issues in some detail and concludes that Stefán composed around forty hymns, enriching "hymn composition by [his use of] attractive and popular meters."¹⁵ However, this whole topic merits further investigation. Stefán composed six Passion hymns and a seventh about Christ's burial (Jón Þorkelsson 1886b, 309ff.), which will be discussed below (see chapter 15).

Stefán's "Svanasöngur" [Swan song] is a kind of spiritual biography that also has links with the poetry of vanity and transience. The opening verse serves as the introduction, as it describes the world turning on its axis: "í dag byljir bíða / bjart er loftið fríða / á morgun hregg og hríð" [today the blizzards bide their time / bright is the beautiful sky / tomorrow storms and snow] (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:224–225). The adventures of the poet are outlined in the second and third verses ("eg var ungur maður" [I was a young man]) but the reader learns little about Stefán's life, except that a robust man was afflicted by sickness when he was just forty years old. This bleak fact is expressed by means of familiar *vanitas* images of evanescence and fragility:

15. sálmakveðskapinn að fögnum og vinsælum háttum (Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 419–410).

allt sem auðnan gaf
 eins og ryk,
 augnablik,
 ókyrrt hjól,
 vindblásin bóla,
 báran, ar eða máni.
 (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:226)

[everything that fate gave
 [disappeared] like dust,
 the blink of an eye,
 a turning wheel,
 a wind-tossed bubble,
 a wave, a speck of dust or the moon.]

The poem is to some extent a meditation on how best to cope with life's instabilities. A three-stanza prayer "Gjör þú mig, lækni líða, lausan við þennan kvíða" [Make me free, Healer of men, from this anxiety] can be found in the middle of the work, followed by a further two stanzas of reflection, before the poem concludes with further prayer and praise. We find the flesh presented as "húss þíns ker" [your house's vessel], a mere covering provided by the Creator. Only one thing is important, no matter whether the body is "kramið, heilt eður lamið" [crushed, whole or beaten]; ultimately man (the soul) must abandon its corporeal "hreysi" [hovel]. The human body is thus more than just a visible entity; it belongs within a larger context. Baroque texts are fascinated with images of physical decay. This sensibility is clearly in evidence here, along with a determination to accept sickness, but we also find the repeated wish that the body might be restored. Jesus is the Healer of men and their wounds, as the poet's prayer recognizes:

lát mig þá
 lækning fá,
 linast meinin,
 bognuð beinin,
 bótina skjóta finna.
 (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:229)

[help me then
 healing to receive,
 hurts to be relieved,
 bent bones
 swift balm to find.]

One hymn attributed to Stefán Ólafsson is “Herra, þér skal heiður og virðing greiða” [Lord, to you shall honor and respect be paid]. This is not an original work, however, but a translation of a piece by Petter Dass, one of the best-known Scandinavian hymn-writers. It can be found in JS 53 8vo, pp. 111v–112r (and elsewhere), where it is attributed to Stefán. Kristinn E. Andrésson points out that the meter used is the same as that in Stefán’s “Dili minn er með dáðahestum talinn” [My Dili is counted among the most dauntless of horses], and adds that the poet was clearly inspired when composing this hymn (Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 436). Yet these stanzas certainly derive from “Den anden sang: Helligt vorde dit Navn” [The second song. Hallowed be your name], one of a lengthy set of hymns by Dass with the title *Katekismesangene* [Catechism songs]; the wisdom of Luther’s “Small Catechism” in verse with a commentary. “Den anden sang” (in the best-known version) consists of sixteen verses, but in Stefán’s version only the first seven stanzas appear in the familiar order (Petter Dass 1980, 2:305–308). The first stanza in the Norwegian original reads as follows:

Herre Gud! Dit dyre Navn og Ære
 Over Verden høyt i Savn maa være,
 Og alle Siæle, og alle Træle
 Og hver Geselle de skal fortælle
 Din Ære.

[O Lord God! Your precious name and glory
 throughout the world is sorely wanted,
 and every soul and every servant
 and every person shall proclaim to you
 your glory.]

The Icelandic translation in JS 53 8vo reads:

Herra þíer skal heidur og vyrðing greida
 himen vindur elldur vatn land eida
 hvað sig kann hræra, hneigia og bæra,
 hätt hid skiæra lof skal læra
 utbreida.

[Lord, to you shall honor and respect be paid.
 Heaven, wind, fire, water, land, isthmus,
 whatever can stir, incline and move itself,
 out loud radiant praise shall learn
 to proclaim.]

Though not particularly close to the original, the Icelandic translation here is certainly a version of the same hymn. In this period literal translation was regarded as less important than conveying the substance of the original work and imitating its style. The fourth stanza of each version lists varieties of fish, though the two lists are not quite identical:

Ja før Gud sin Ære skal forlise
 Før skal Hav og grommen Hval ham prise,
 Samt og Tantejen, som løber Leyen,
 Steenbid og Seyen og Torsk og Skreyen.
 Og Niise.
 (Petter Dass 1980, 2:307)

[Yes, before the glory of God will end,
 first will the waves and the rumbling whale praise him,
 and also the dolphin that leaps in the sea,
 the catfish and saithe and cod and pollock
 and porpoise.]

The hymn text in JS 53 8vo reads:

Aller hluter eins heiter sem kallder
 allzkins dyr og fiskar i siö margfallder
 þoskur, jsa, aalar, lysa
 upsar hnijsa eirn Gud prijsa
 umm allder.

[Every thing both hot and cold,
all sorts of beasts, and fish in many seas,
codfish, haddock, whiting and eel,
porpoise and whale, praise one God
for ever.]

We do not know exactly when *Katekismesangene* were composed. Petter Dass died in 1707 at the age of sixty and the text was first printed in Copenhagen in 1715. The evidence suggests that he may well have worked on the poem for quite some time, revising and adding stanzas, and that the verse quoted above soon became well known in a variety of forms (Haarberg 2000, 119; also Margrét Eggertsdóttir and Haarberg 2010).

The attribution to Stefán Ólafsson may be incorrect, but because the original text is so difficult to date it would be wrong to reject the possibility that Stefán might have been familiar with the seven verses from *Katekismesangene* before he died. In his lifetime Dass never achieved the prestige enjoyed by Kingo, for example; only one of his pieces was printed before he died.¹⁶ Yet his works were popular among the general public, and manuscripts containing his poems circulated widely in Scandinavia. Stefán was clearly familiar with the meter used by Dass in *Katekismesangene* because, as we have seen, he employs it himself in his *vísur* about Díli the horse (Stefán Ólafsson 1:1885, 394–395). Moreover, JS 53 8vo contains other poems in the same or similar measure.¹⁷ Though possibly a coincidence, it could also suggest that the scribe liked or had a particular interest in the meter.

We recall that Stefán translated Kingo's *Vikusálmur* [Hymns for the week] on the recommendation of Bishop Þórður Þorláksson (Jón Þorkelsson 1886b, 314). Þórður (1637–1697) had been a contemporary of Thomas Kingo while studying theology at the University of Copenhagen. He was better educated and more widely traveled than most of his contemporaries and was a pioneering figure in several respects; it is fair to say that he brought baroque culture with him on his return to Iceland (see Loftur Guttormsson 1998a, 33ff.). Stefán

16. *Den norske Dale-Vise*, printed in Copenhagen in 1683.

17. For example, on 11v–13r we find “Sumar-ösk wppa gledelegt sumar sem nu byriast Anno 1717 d: 22 April” [Greetings for a Happy Summer that is now beginning, 22 April 1717].



Stefán Ólafsson with his parents, Ólafur Einarsson of Kirkjubær and Kristín Stefánsdóttir, and siblings. Þjóðminjasafn Íslands [National Museum of Iceland]. Photograph: Ívar Brynjólfsson

also translated a travel hymn by Kingo that begins, “I Jesu himmelsøde navn / min rejse jeg begynder” [In Jesus’ heaven-sweet name, / my journey I begin]; the equivalent lines in Stefán’s Icelandic version read “Í sætu Jesú nafni ég / uppbyrja ferð að sinni” [In sweet Jesus’ name I / begin my journey now] (Jón Þorkelsson 1886b, 344; Kingo 3:975, 253–260).¹⁸ He then translated a Danish hymn by Melanchthon that had originally been composed in Latin. It is a prayer to the Holy Trinity and begins, “Þökk sé þér, góð gjörð / Guð vor faðir kæri” [Thanks be to you, good [thanks] be given / God our Father dear] (Stefán Ólafsson 2:1886, 336). This is a variant of the Sapphic meter used by Stefán in his early neo-Latin verse. He also translated Danish and German hymns, including a lullaby by Johann Mattheus (Jón Þorkelsson 1886b, 349; Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 149),¹⁹ along with at least one Latin hymn by Prudentius (ca. 348–405), the Spanish poet who was a major influence on hymn-writers of later periods (Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 149–150; *Deutsche Literatur* 2, 275). Kristinn E. Andrésson also sees no reason to doubt the attribution to Stefán of a translation of the Latin poem “Stabat virgo dolorosa” (Stefán Ólafsson 1886 II, 176ff.). Stefán certainly contributed importantly to the renewal of Icelandic hymn writing, both with his own compositions and through his translations of fine traditional and contemporary hymns.

The Poetry of Complaint

One of Stefán’s best-known complaint poems is “Ómennskukvæði” [A poem about sloth], composed in rhyming hexameters. The poet compares past and present, as Hallgrímur Pétursson does in “Aldarháttur” [The spirit of the age]. He detects and criticizes a widespread laziness and lack of enterprise, but also feels that people in general are insolent and have ideas above their station. In good

18. The opening of Hallgrímur Pétursson’s travel hymn “Ég byrja reisu mín / Jesú í nafni þín” [I begin my journey, Jesus, in thy name] certainly recalls Kingo’s relaxed and elegant style.

19. Johannes Mathesius (1504–1565) was a German theologian and poet, a friend and colleague of Luther. Translations of his hymns have been attributed to Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás and others; see Faulkes 1993, 121–126.

times they make plans to marry and set up home: “Með gagnlegu hári / í gylliniári sig giftir hann / beislar nú klárinn / með bólginn nára [. . .]” [with well-groomed hair / in a golden year he gets wed / then harnesses the workhorse / with its heavy groin] (Stefán Ólafsson 1:1885, 266). But when times are hard people grow lethargic, the crops fail and everything collapses. Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík says that Stefán “recited his poems outside the church after service for the benefit of the farmers in his parish, whom he thought were out riding too much and engaged in other debauchery,” and seems to have convinced at least some of them to change their ways.²⁰ This is compelling evidence for poems having been recited in front of those for whom they were composed. Such poetry was unquestionably official. In this instance the descriptions are vivid, humorous and somewhat exaggerated. Repetition and multiple rhymes (italicized below) help to create verbal energy, while the imagery is partly intended to amuse the audience:

Með hattinn í *vanga* þeir spjátra, þeir *spranga*, þeir sperra sinn *legg*,
þeir stíma, þeir *stanga*, þeir masa, þeir *manga* við moldarvegg,
með skúfana *langa* þeir laga sitt *skegg*,
og láta þá *hanga* þó úti sé *hregg*.

Þeir renna, þeir *ríða*, þeir skrefa, þeir *skríða* á skjótum *jór*,
með hempuna *síða* og hettuna *víða* á heilakór,
sá undan kann *býða* læst ekki *mjór*,
en eftir að *bíða* er minnkun *stór*.
(Stefán Ólafsson 1:1885, 267–268)

[With hat on head they swagger, they swank, they strut their stuff,
they wrestle, they goad, they gossip, they flirt by the earth-wall,
with long tufts they titivate their beards,
and have them hang down though there is a hurricane outside.

They run, they ride, they step, they sit astride a fast horse,
with long cassock and wide hat on the brain-choir [= head],

20. hafi lesið kvæði upp við kirkju eptir messu fyrir sóknarbændum sínum, er honum hafi þótt þeir ríða of mikið út og gefa sig við öðru sukki (Stefán Ólafsson 1:1885, 262; see under “bóndi” in Add. 7 4to, p. 1906).

the man who knows how to use his whip is proud of himself,
while waiting seems to him wholly demeaning.]

The poem “Heimsádeila” [Critique of the world] is less comic. In it we find the familiar baroque formula of a perverse world which “réttlætir ranglátan / ranglætir hinn fróma mann” [excuses the wrong-doer / wrongs the one who is righteous] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:300–302). As in Hallgrímur Pétursson’s complaint poetry there is criticism of bribery and social injustice. In comparing worthy and righteous people with an oak that “engan hefir börk né blöð” [has no bark or leaves] and rots out in the countryside, the poet recalls *Hávamál*, while his description of those who flourish in society employs familiar rhetorical figures such as *accumulatio*: “þeir sem seilast aðra á / orga, deila, stinga, slá, / strjúka, stela, ljúga [. . .]” [those who pester others / scream, argue, stab, strike, / stroke, steal, lie [. . .]] (ibid., 300–301).

Love Poems and the Fashion for Pastoral

The love poems for which Stefán Ólafsson is best known and in which European influence is discernible are very different from his comic verse. We find in them a measured and tasteful depiction of a beautiful and “vel siðaðrar” [very civilized] young woman and her distressed unrequited lover. In Stefán’s comic verse, however, love affairs are almost always coarse, unhappy and associated with sins such as avarice and gluttony: these will be discussed in greater detail later. It is worth reflecting on why love poems such as “Raunakvæði” [A lament] and “Meyjarmissir” [Loss of a maiden] are so striking. There were certainly many kinds of Icelandic love poems, refrains and dance verses, but these were not official works by a named author and their survival was a matter of chance. Páll Jónsson of Staðarhóll (1530?–1598) set a new tone in love lyrics that were certainly influenced by foreign models (Sverrir Tómasson 1967). In “Blómið í garðinum” [The flower in the garden] the flower image is a metaphor, in that the poet’s beloved is like the fairest of blooms. Such images were common in sixteenth-century German and Danish poems that were popular among the nobility and upper echelons of society, but the wording also points to folksong influence. The

first Danish love poems date from the sixteenth century. Well-born folk collected them in “Adelens Poesibøger, mellem Folkeviser og Lyrik paa Fransk og Tysk” [poetry books, together with folksongs and lyrics in French and German] (Billeskov Jansen 1944, 185), and seem particularly influenced by German lyric poetry. These pieces are simple in spirit with their frank depictions of the joys and sorrows of innocent love-longing.

It appears that not all of “Meyjarmissir” is Stefán’s work; the final two stanzas are from a translated (we may assume) poem called “Kvæði fallett útlenskt” [A beautiful foreign poem] (preserved in AM 148 8vo, 337r–338r);²¹ the translator’s identity is not known. Stefán appears to have composed the first two stanzas (Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 101; Jón Helgason 1955, 69–70). In both Stefán’s love poems we find sadness at the lover’s inability to win the heart of his beloved, while the main focus of “Raunakvæði” is to depict the young woman’s appearance and qualities (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:34–35). Stefán uses a variety of rhetorical figures including exaggeration (“allur svo eg brann” [as if I burned all over]), comparison (“eins og mjöllin hrein” [like the pure snow]), and metaphor (Friese 1968, 125–126), and these elements do not derive from the beautiful but simple (almost naive) Danish poetry of the sixteenth century (described as “dilettantpoesi” by Billeskov Jansen 1944, 185). Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík claims that “Meyjarmissir” was composed in Copenhagen after Stefán had heard from Iceland that his beloved had broken her engagement promises to him (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:37–38). If this is true we may wonder whether the Copenhagen literary environment encouraged Stefán to write a poem of this type, and, more generally, what literary models and influences he might have encountered during his five years in Denmark from 1643.

The fashion for pastoral poetry developed in Denmark at this time, and Stefán is the only Icelandic poet known to have composed/translated such a poem. In “Lúkíðor og Krysilis” the

21. Versions of this meter can be found in *Danske Viser* III, 263–265 and in Anders Bording 1984, 146–148. Jens Pedersen also composed pieces in this meter for the hymn book published by Kingo in 1689: see Thomas Kingo 1975, 4:314–316. Stefán Einarsson has pointed out the meter’s indebtedness to J.S. Bach’s hymn melody “Ach Gott und Herr” (Stefán Einarsson 1964, 45).

shepherd Lúkíðor and his fair shepherdess Kryssillis jest and kiss in the sun, surrounded by their grazing herd and with a stream in the background flowing peacefully through the meadow. We know that Stefán's poem is a translation of a work by the Danish poet Søren Terkelsen (d. 1656/7) beginning "Lucidor / som maatte gaa" [Lucidor / who had to go] (*Astree Siunge-Choer, Tredie Snæs* 1654; Friese 1968, 128–129; Jón Samsonarson 1974), and that Terkelsen's literary model was *Astrée*, a German pastoral novel whose French original was by Honoré d'Urfé.²² It is clear, therefore, that Stefán knew of Terkelsen's work, which in its day had prepared the way for a new kind of poetry in Denmark—pastoral verse—that was immensely popular in the baroque period. The emergence of pastoral writing in Denmark led to the development of a new kind of lyric about love and nature, more artful and formal in structure than the simplicities of sixteenth-century love verse. Though the origins of such poems lie in ancient Greece, their more immediate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century model was Virgil's *Eclogae* a work with which Stefán Ólafsson was certainly familiar. Terkelsen's work was published in Denmark over six years from 1648, with the first volume appearing in the year that Stefán returned to Iceland. He could well have encountered pastoral poetry before this, because by 1645 Anders Bording (1619–1677) had translated into Danish a pastoral piece by the German poet Johann Rist (1607–1667); the translation begins "Daphnis gik for nogle Dage" [Daphnis went for several days]. The poem depicts love-longing and its sorrowful aftermath in ways that recall the presentation of these same elements in Stefán's own love poetry; we read of "Elskovens store Smerte" [Love's great pain] and the refrain "Thi mig er af Hiertet væ / For min skiønnest Galathe" [You are my heart's woe / my fairest Galathea] (Bording 1984, 232–233). Pastoral poems thus treat both the careless rapture and cruelties of love and romance.

"Meyjarmissir" and "Raunakvæði" are not fully-fledged pastoral poems; their protagonists are not shepherds or shepherdesses and the settings are not traditionally sylvan. Nevertheless

22. Terkelsen also translated Johann Rist's Passion poems. They were printed in 1661 as "Her Johan Ristis Passion-Vjser" and were similarly influential in the development of Danish hymns (Friese 1968, 86).

the fashion for pastoral may have encouraged Stefán to compose poems about love and longing. The imagery and vocabulary also point to the influence of the new pastoral, as the old-fashioned simplicities of earlier love lyrics are abandoned. In “Raunakvæði” [A lament] he makes use of Old Icelandic poetic language, as with “baugalína” [lady] and “silkirein” [lady] though the poem’s main decorative elements are adjectival: “bjartleir” [bright of countenance], “bliðleir” [mild of countenance], “svipgóð” [good-looking], “fótsmá” [petite of foot], “augnskær” [bright-eyed] and the like. Poets’ fondness for extravagant adjectival amplification (*epitheton ornans*) is very characteristic of Danish baroque (Billeskov Jansen 1944, 75). Before the days of Bording and Terkelsen pastoral poems had been composed in Latin rather than Danish. Terkelsen was a customs official in Glückstadt and had every opportunity for contact with literary life in Hamburg and the surrounding region. His association with Johann Rist, the clerical poet of Wedel (a town between Hamburg and Glückstadt), was particularly significant. Rist and his circle introduced Terkelsen to French, Dutch and German poetry, which he in turn “ivrigt omplantede til Dansk” [eagerly transplanted into Danish] (Billeskov Jansen 1944, 69) after 1640. Storstein and Sørensen point out that the ambiguity of pastoral finds expression in Terkelsen’s works not least because he translated poems by the sensitive Rist and the more robust Voigtländer, who died ca. 1643 and whose works are an extension of established comic tradition (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 176). Though Voigtländer certainly observed due decorum in his poetry his imagery is more transparent, and his somewhat elliptical verses intended to tickle the fleshly fancy are in fact easier to understand.²³

As we have noted, Stefán was living in Denmark when pastoral verse first became fashionable, but it was Thomas Kingo several decades later who lent a more personal coloring to the genre in two

23. The “Skæmtetradition” appears, for example, in “Schwankdichtung,” the German literary genre that became well known in Europe in translation (Röcke 1991, 180–181; see Seelow 1989). This genre seems to derive from moral satire but developed into the comic representation of unseemly behavior and the mishaps of those who lack moral understanding; in this way the contrasting elements of indignation and laughter are united.

pastoral love lyrics, “Chrysilles” (ca. 1670) and “Candida” (1694; Thomas Kingo 1975, 1:79–98). As was common in love poems of the period, the poet conceals the true identity of his subject by adopting a literary pseudonym. Kingo’s poem is a confession of love to a young woman named Chrysilles: “En hyrde Daatter est du jo / og blant din faderß faar / Gich første Blomsters aar / Dig glædde tit den hyrde bo, / Hyrdindens malche spand / Kom tit for mund og Tand [. . .]” [You are a shepherd’s daughter / and among your father’s sheep / you walked in the bloom of your youth / the shepherd’s estate often gladdened you / the shepherdess’s milk vessel / came often to your mouth and teeth] (Thomas Kingo 1975, 1:80). Thus the girl’s youth is spent in a pastoral idyll far removed from reality. The poem’s subject may be Kingo’s first wife Silke Balkenborg, with the author represented by the shepherd Myrtillo. As for “Candida,” it was composed for Birgitte Balslev, who at the age of thirty became the sixty-year-old poet’s third wife. It was said that Kingo had loved her long before the death of his second wife (Thomas Kingo 1975a, 4:183–184, see Friese 1968, 205–208 and Thomas Kingo 1975, 1:307–308).

Comic and Underground Verse

In a chapter on parody, mockery and sexuality in their *Den barokke tekst* volume Storstein and Sørensen cite many examples from seventeenth-century Danish poetry in which the subject matter of occasional verse is inverted, respectful praise becomes broad vulgarity, and otherwise unmentionable bodily organs are unblushingly named, often accompanied by references to respectable official verse such as royal eulogies or religious poems. Most of the poets were theologians, many of them holding official positions. Storstein and Sørensen suggest that all these elements have their parallels in official texts: “virtually all the major themes can be found in inverted form in the unpublished domestic verse that circulated in manuscript.”²⁴ It is a characteristic of many of Stefán’s comic poems that they treat people from the lower orders of society, most often

24. Sådan kan man finde stort set alle de store temaer vendt på hovedet i den utrykte lejlighedsdøse, der cirkulerede i afskrift på afskrift (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 181).

laborers, sometimes criminals, as for example in his “Gamanvísur um bréfamann” [Comic verses about a bearer of letters], which tells of a fraudulent thief. The characters are of much lower social status than the poet and their deeds are vainglorious, deceitful and ridiculous. Such themes might be expected to find expression in a low stylistic register but this is often not the case. In order to heighten the comic effect the poet uses sophisticated meters such as *dróttkvætt* or hexameter variants, together with traditional poetic diction and figures of speech (exaggeration, understatement and metaphor). The humor lies in the disjuncture between subject matter and style. It might even be said that Stefán demeans himself by devoting time and energy to mocking laborers and even beggars. We might also ask for whom such poetry was intended. Was its purpose educational, with the lampooning of ordinary folk designed to shame others into behavior more appropriate to their social status? Would Stefán’s learned humor, wordplay and metrical ingenuity have been understood by ordinary folk? Or were his comic poems aimed at a more sophisticated readership that shared his attitudes and could appreciate the rhetorical strategies behind the comic disjunctures? Or was there something for both audiences in the poetry? As we have noted, those scholars who were the first to comment on Stefán’s comic verse claimed that it represents his best work.

Stefán Ólafsson’s best-known poems of this type are “Oddsbragur” and “Rönkufótsríma.” Both pieces seem to be discussing real people, contemporaries of the poet; for example, “Oddsbragur” [Oddur’s poem] is said to have been composed about Oddur Þorvarðsson, about whom nothing is known. Manuscript titles indicate that “Rönkufótsríma” was composed about Sigurður Eyjólffsson, who was known by the unexplained nickname “Rönkufótur.” In his introduction to the poem (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:104) Jón Þorkelsson notes that Sigurður had lived at Strönd on land owned by the church at Vallanes, citing the poem as confirmation. It is conceivable that the poem’s recipient knew exactly the real identity of Sigurður, but the historical reality is now hard to recover. “Rönkufótsríma” is set in the region around Lagarfljót. The poem centers on Vallanes and the protagonist’s attitude to the church is of great importance (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:103–124).

He is a renowned fisherman and in the first part of the poem we find him fishing through a hole in the ice. He leaves his catch behind in a sack, over which he forgets to make the sign of the Cross:

Eptir poka á ísnum lét,
en eigi signdi,
sunnanþoka seig í hret,
en síðan rigndi.

[Left his sack on the ice,
and did not cross-sign it,
southern fog gave way to storm,
and then it rained.]

He continues to fish and soon the weather changes. A thaw sets in, the waters rise, the river bursts its banks and the fisherman escapes on foot; he prays for God's help and loses his sack of fish. The story continues in locations along Lagarfljót where the missing sack ends up. Place-names are identified and nature plays an important role in events; it is personified and described in mythological terms by means of traditional kennings. The Lagarfljót monster with its nine humps awakens and the cairn spirits are on the move:

Jötna sessi skruggur skóku
og skemtu draugum,
Rauður og Bessi rumskast tóku
og rugga haugum.

[Thunder disturbed the giants' seats
and delighted the ghosts,
Rauður and Bessi began to rise
and rock the grave-mounds.]

Here we find natural and supernatural forces united against the main protagonist. Under the waterfall is a strange creature, a seal with hair sprouting from its forehead like the branches of a small tree, with the pupil in its eye a "bjartur blossi" [bright flash], and with "bak sem hólmi" [a back like a small island] (Stefán Ólafsson

1885, 1:116). This creature duly swallows the sack of fish. The exhausted Sigurður believes that a great marvel has taken place and he now also understands why these events have happened. He had been fishing at this exact location when he heard the church clocks at Vallanes summoning the faithful to worship, but so well had the fishing been going that he had ignored the call. He realizes that he is being punished for his failure to attend church twice in a row, and so by way of penance he vows to present the church with three of every fifteen fish that he catches. When Sigurður returns home he sleeps soundly and dreams that the sack of fish approaches him and rebukes him somewhat imperiously for promising “of lint” [too little] to the “húsið dýra” [precious house: that is, the church], thereby failing to break the spell on the sack. He believes this vision and is convinced that good fortune has now abandoned him. This proves to be the case, for at the end of the poem the poet reports that shortly before completing his composition he heard of Sigurður’s death. The message is clear: greed interfered with the fisherman’s devotions and led to his death. Storstein and Sørensen note that Kingo and other baroque writers explore the same themes in both their serious and comic poems, albeit making use of different images (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 180).

Both “Rönkufótsríma” and Magnús Ólafsson’s “Flateyjarríma” use the same meter. Stefán has a ready command of poetic language, but the kennings he deploys are fewer and more straightforward than those in “Flateyjarríma” and overall the poem is easier to understand. That said, several of the kennings are far from obvious, as when describing bad weather in “Flateyjarríma”: “Jötuns belgur úr byrjar stræti / bylti vindi” [the giant’s bellows from the route of storms / roared with wind] (Finnur Sigmundsson 1960, 51, v. 168) and in “Rönkufótsríma” “Jötuns vængja sveiflið svarta / sendi úrir” [the stirring of the dark wings of the giant / sent rain] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:109). In “Flateyjarríma” the sea is “Ýmis blóð” [Ýmir’s blood] and in “Rönkufótsríma” “Ýmis dreyri” [Ýmir’s blood]. The daughters of Hlér, the mythological sea-giant, are mentioned in “Flateyjarríma,” while in “Rönkufótsríma” “konur hængja” [wives of salmon] are afraid in the chamber of Hlér.

Another of Stefán’s comic poems, “Oddsbragur,” tells of a hopelessly unseaworthy boat. Oddur, the boat-builder, is foolish

enough to trust his own craftsmanship and sets sail in it along with his young daughter. The boat proves to be a “manndrápsbolli” [cup of death], Oddur sinks beneath the waves, and there is no news of the child. In the depths of the ocean Oddur encounters all kinds of fish who recognize him as an experienced fisherman and are now eager for revenge, but fortunately at that moment he encounters a whirlpool, is propelled rapidly to the surface, where he soon encounters his daughter who is crying not for her father but for the “skiptapann” [loss of the ship]. When Oddur feels safe “þótti honum mál að kalla á Krist” [it seemed to him a good idea to pray to Christ], and needs a poet to compose a poem “um sitt fall og fagra lausn úr fiskarann” [about his fall from grace and happy release from the home of the fish]. Here the humor lies in the references to both sacred and secular literary tradition: ideas of redemption and salvation through faith alongside images of battles from medieval legendary sagas. Both “Oddsbragur” and “Rönkufótsríma” address grave matters of life, death, and salvation in a humorous way. Subjects that are treated with unyielding solemnity in the official poetry of church and society here become a source of comic relief.

We may ask to what extent Stefán Ólafsson’s comic verse is a reflection of everyday reality or an exercise in artful parody and literary tradition. Nicknames are used for the characters in the poems, those unable to control their urges are duly ridiculed, and the links with burlesque or carnival poetry are clear, as Stefán Einarsson has noted:

Stefán Ólafsson loved drawing burlesque pictures of his servants and neighbors, at times in situations hardly printable. His juicy style was sometimes almost Rabelaisian, his figures twisted and contorted, His subjects were liable to have huge appetites, smearing themselves all over when eating, their bellies rumbling, their backsides noisy (Stefán Einarsson 1957, 200–201).

The comic tradition that Stefan may have encountered in Denmark works in just this way, as do the other native elements identified in the discussion of “Flateyjarríma” (see above, chapter 6). The tradition was both medieval in origin and a prominent feature of

seventeenth-century secular poetry (see Sørensen and Storstein 1999, 181). “Hornfirðingakvæði” [A poem about Hornafjörður folk] and “Flóamannakvæði” [A poem about Flóamenn] deal with entire districts (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:179–184). “Flóamannakvæði” is to some extent a description of the scruffy appearance of the farmers of Árnessýsla,²⁵ who look like vagrants:

Bændurnir hafa þar ballskorið hár,
buxurnar stuttar en hempurnar þrjár,
neðri faldur hér
niðri í hnésbót er,
en hæðin kraganna hnakkann sker.

[There the farmers have shorn hair,
short trousers and three coats,
with nether-hems
down to their knee patches,
and high collars cutting into their necks.]

However, the poem is mainly concerned with local customs of cuisine and hospitality. People invite one another home and are generous hosts: “flest er á takteinum fæðunnar hnossið” [most kinds of goodies are made ready]. When strangers stay, which is not often, they are offered skyr and piping hot, burnt porridge topped with a knob of salted and very rancid butter, which the locals devour with great relish, leaving nothing on the plate, after which they doze off. As for the guests, “kviðaður allvel á dýnuna datt” [they collapse bloated on the mattress] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:182). Next morning the locals think only of continuing where they left off the night before: “Fyrst þegar sólin á fjöllum skín / fullkominn skatt gefur matseljan fín / skyrið nýtt er nóg [. . .]” [When the sun first shines on the fells / the worthy housekeeper provides the finest treat, / fresh skyr is plentiful [. . .]] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:182).

25. *Flóamannakvæði* is widely attributed to Stefán in manuscripts, yet it can also be found in an autograph manuscript of Bjarni Gissurarson, Thott 473 4to. Though this suggests that it may be Bjarni’s work, Bjarni could simply have copied Stefán’s poem into his manuscript; see Kristinn E. Andrésson 1928, 175.

The poet may be unimpressed by such traditions but the people clearly do not go hungry:

Um aftaninn heyri eg þar allvíða sið
 aftur þeir herða sinn sjatnaða kvið,
 svoddan sældarplag
 og sífellt borðalag
 hafa þeir á árinu hvern og einn dag.
 (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:183)

[In the evening, I hear, it's standard form
 to suck in their sated stomachs once more;
 such a happy tradition,
 with tables always laden,
 they uphold every day of the year.]

The main pretext for “Hornfirðingakvæði” (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:185–187) was a feast: “Í Álfafirði var brúðkaupið best / borin voru þangað ölföngin mest / það spyrst um borg og bý / búrar fagna því” [In Alftafjörður was the best of bridals, / much strong drink was brought there, / there were tidings of borough and farm, / the boorish welcome this]. There are comic depictions of farmers riding to the feast: “Allir riðu eftir ölsins þef / og upp í goluna settu sín nef” [All rode following the whiff of the drink / and into the wind raised their noses].

In both these poems we sense an unmistakable delight in life; the food at Flóinn may not seem particularly appetizing but the locals enjoy it, while in “Hornfirðingakvæði” the wedding is a source of joy and anticipation and a celebration of love and fertility. The scene recalls Bakhtin’s reference to “banquet images in popular-festive tradition” (Bakhtin 1984, 301), when folk assemble to enjoy food and drink as if signalling the victory of life over death. Immoderate love of food and sex features repeatedly in Stefán Ólafsson’s comic verse. A representative example is “Um Þorstein mat” [On Þorsteinn the Foodie] (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:70–71). The poem tells of a man who eats incessantly while at the same time shaking his “heilastall” [brain-stall = head] down into the dish. Nothing may interrupt him: “út þó hertist iðra port / ekki latur tæmdi fat”

[though intestinal yard [= stomach] is bursting / he was not slow to empty his bowl].

“Stásmeyjarkvæði” [Poem about a fashion-conscious girl] is either a translation or based on a foreign model. From some manuscripts we learn that it was translated from Danish (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:19). The poem offers a comically exaggerated account of a twelve-year-old girl who is clearly madly in love with a fine young man whom she has encountered in a dream and whom (she informs her mother) she must marry at once. Venus and Cupid make brief and improbable appearances. In “Griðkuvísur” [A housemaid’s verses] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:303–307) the humor is somewhat coarser: “Griðkan gírnist manninn / og getur ei haldið sér” [The housemaid yearns for the man / and can hardly contain herself]. The woman tries to conceal her physical deficiencies in order to attract the man in question but all to no avail. Unlike the girl in Stefán’s popular poem “Björt mey og hrein” [A bright maid and pure], her main problems are a swarthy complexion that no painstaking application of paints and potions can conceal, and whiskers that she tries in vain to remove. Such images also find a place in the linked verses “Descriptio virginis formosae” and “Descriptio virginis deformis” (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:11–18). In the idealized first stanza we learn that “Allt er hún þetta sem eg kann að tjá / augnfögur, kinnrjóð, munnfríð og smá / sem skíraða gullið á brún og brá” [She is everything that I can describe, / fair-eyed, red-cheeked, pretty and petite of mouth, / and with forehead and brows of brightest gold]. A very different picture emerges in the second verse: “Allt er hún þetta sem eg kann að tjá / augndöpur, gráföl, munnvíð á ská / sem svartasta kolið á brún og brá” [She is everything that I can describe, / sad of eye, pale of complexion, wide and slanting of mouth, / with forehead and brows of darkest coal].

In “Guðmundur digri” [Guðmundur the Stout] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:134–136) the joke lies in the contrast between the learned Latin phrases and the frank descriptions of Guðmundur’s flatulence in church and elsewhere, and in the depiction of his futile amorous dalliances. “Díakon” [The deacon] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:137–138) may well be about the same character, Guðmundur Snorrason. “Konuleysingjakvæði” [A single man’s poem] (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:25–31) tells of a man searching in vain for the

right woman. He is a demanding suitor; for example, the woman must be neither too abstemious nor too gluttonous, neither too shy nor too brazen, neither too demure nor too eager to please. Kristinn E. Andr sson has drawn attention to a Danish poem with a similar theme though in a different meter (*Danske viser* I, 148–150), and believes that Stef n could have heard this piece and attempted to imitate it (Kristinn E. Andr sson 1928, 374). In “Kolbeinn   Hvammshyl” [Kolbeinn of Hvammshylur] (Stef n  lafsson 1885, 1:133–134) what seems to be a straightforward depiction of a couple soon becomes coarse and sexually charged, with the man compared to a ram while the woman herself is pregnant:

Koli b r   Hvammshyl,
 hefur miki  kr knef
 bogadregi , leggl gur,
 l ra   ttur, augnsk r,
 h lsstuttur, hausbrattur,
 hr ti l kast s r  t,
 en hnotvaxin, h rleit
 og hvelkvi u  Rakel.

[Koli lives at Hvammshylur,
 has a big hooknose,
 bent-backed, short-legged,
 thick-thighed, bright-eyed,
 bull-necked, straight-headed,
 looks just like a ram;
 and bucksome, warm-hearted
 and big-bellied Rakel.]

“Inga gr  ir  rstein lama an” [Inga heals  rsteinn the lame] (Stef n  lafsson 1886, 2:72) is an eight-line stanza featuring a scarcely concealed depiction of sexual intercourse and its aftermath. Stef n also composed comic verses about people who have fallen foul of the authorities because of their illegitimate children or other sexual misadventures (Stef n  lafsson 1886, 2:85–86). There is even a verse attributed to him in which an executioner is praised and his duties described.

As these examples suggest, Stefán's occasional verse can often be quite theatrical. Depictions of people's appearance and behavior are not merely for the eye: they involve sound and movement. In "Sigurður scurra" [Sigurður the fool], for instance, we register not only the appearance of the main character, "kámleitur, kviðsár" [grimy, stomach-sore], but also the murmurings of his digestive tract, "gaul er görnum skapt" [grumbling in the guts is caused], and some sense of his table manners, "skyri skvettir í kjapt / svo skellur upp um hvern rapt" [skyr he splashes into his mouth, / it sprays up over every rafter] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:131–133). Imba the cook is the principal character in "Pönnusmíði Björns Bjarnasonar" [Björn Bjarnarson's pan-making] (1649). The manuscripts indicate that the poem was composed after the pastor's specially made candle-holder had proved to be useless, much to Imba's annoyance (Stefán Ólafsson 1885 I, 79). She is described thus: "hún vinnur smátt / en hrýtur hátt / hryglan eykur varaslátt" [she works little / but snores loudly, / the bronchial rattle increases the lip-trembling] (Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:80–81).

Stefán's comic poetry reveals a populist sense of humor, in which the high and mighty are brought low, physicality is emphasized, and bodily organs are exaggerated and distorted as in carnivalesque literature. Yet at the same time his verse is clearly intended to support the prevailing worldview. According to this, people must recognize and accept their station in life, for failure to do so leads only to misfortune or worse; and, second, those who lack piety and clear spiritual values are on the road to ruin. Storstein and Sørensen argue that the inclination to invert everything good and sincere represents both the repetition and distortion of a formula whose origins lie in serious literature (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 182). The mindset remains the same: comic verse can expose a fallen world in which the corrupt and vain rule the roost while poets delight in artfully highlighting their many follies. Ultimately both humor and seriousness can involve the alteration and inversion of perspectives, for nothing is what it seems and everything is unstable and transient. The comic poetry of Stefán and his contemporaries tests the limits of respectability and is to some extent the opposite of official poetry. It represents "underground" verse in the sense that such pieces could never be printed, but it was nevertheless a crucial

element in seventeenth-century Icelandic verse. Failure to recognize its significance would lead to an unbalanced understanding of the period.

Hallgrímur Pétursson also composed comic verse. One such piece, which has also been attributed to Stefán, is “Eins og forinn feitur” [Like a fat bellwether]. It mocks the respected and learned Arngrímur Jónsson of Melstaðir in Miðfjörður,²⁶ who is compared to a ram whose vanity prevents it from retaining its balance. Neither the identity of the individual nor the overall meaning is made explicit, for the verse is allegorical. Were it not for the opening words “eins og” [just like] it would be possible to take the lines quite literally. However, we are given to understand at the outset that the image also refers to something other than an animal:

Eins og forinn feitur
fénu mögru hjá
stendur strembileitur
stórri þúfu á
þegir og þykist frjáls,
þetta kennir þrjáls,
reigir hann sig og réttir upp
rófuna til hálfis,
sprettir úr spori með státi
og sparðar af gravitáti.
(Hallgrímur Pétursson 1887–90, 2:441;
Stefán Ólafsson 1885, 1:74–75)

26. Jón of Grunnavík writes: “It is said that he [Arngrímur Jónsson] was arrogant in manner and conduct and somewhat boastful. On one occasion at the Alþingi when Arngrímur was walking around or strolling by himself down on the sandbank where the high court would meet, Hallgrímur Pétursson the poet was lying out on the slope above, chatting with various people and having fun with small boys; he looked down and saw Arngrímur walking by himself on the sandbank and is said to have composed this single verse” [Menn segja einnig, að hann [Arngrímur Jónsson] hafi verið þóttalegur í fasi og framgöngu og státað sig nokkuð. Því bar so við, að einu sinni á alþingi, þá síra Arngrímur var að ganga um gólf eður að spatziera fyrir sig alleina þar fyrir neðan á lögréttueyrinni, en síra Hallgrímur skáld Pétursson lá þar fyrir ofan uppi í hallinum og var að tala þar við ýmsa menn og gamna sér við smádrengi og leit síra Arngrím ganga niðri á eyrinni fyrir sig alleina, skyldi hann kveðið hafa stöku þessa] (Jón Ólafsson 1950, 77).

[Just like a fat bellwether
 alongside lean sheep
 stands haughty
 on a heavy sod;
 is silent and seems free,
 there's self-conceit in this;
 stiffens itself and stretches
 its tail half out,
 sprints off proudly
 and poops with dignity.]

This is a strikingly vivid picture, comic to the point of vulgarity, even though the subject is merely a ram evacuating its bowels. But the text has more than one meaning. Reading between the lines we recognize that the poem is describing a man as well as an animal, and a venerable one at that; and it is at this point that the poem might be said to breach the bounds of decorum. The message seems to be that the individual in question has an inflated sense of his own importance, and that with such miscalculations comes moral admonition: “þetta kennir þrjáls” [there's self-conceit in this]. Vanity can (and perhaps should) be brought low; whoever behaves arrogantly has forgotten that in this dull sublunary world things are rarely what they seem and that all flesh is grass.

Baroque Style And Meter

We have noted that two particular elements characterize the poetry of Stefán Ólafsson: the strong if often indirect influence of European verse and the wide variety of meter deployed, involving experimentation and innovation and revealing a genuine interest in poetic form. The nature and intensity of such interest depend to some extent on the instincts of individual poets, but they can also reflect contemporary trends. The innovatory features identifiable in Stefán's verse resemble in many ways those being introduced by poets associated with baroque or “reform” verse. In the first part of the seventeenth century various treatises on metrics were published in Denmark and elsewhere, and poets eagerly experimented with

the resources and possibilities revealed. For instance, the sonnet was a popular new form, though it was not until the nineteenth century that it was first used (by Jónas Hallgrímsson) in Iceland. Yet by no means all new meters were imported, for Icelandic poets had native traditions to draw on and these were used much more often during this period. This process of prosodic renewal involved rediscovering early Norse measures, as well as testing the flexibility of the Icelandic language through experimentation with rhyme and sonic effects. Stefán used both classical and Old Norse meters, such as *dróttkvætt* and *fornyrðislag*, and rhyme features prominently in his poetry. We may also note his fondness for short final rhymes that create a distinctive rhythm and emphasis in particular feet. One example is his popular verse about a merchant:

Danskurinn og fjanskurinn á Djúpavog
hann dregur að sér auðinn við brimseltusog
með fjandlega gilding og falska vog
færi betur reyrðist um hálsinn hans tog.
Við landsfólkið setur hann upp ragnið og rog,
reiðin hann tekur sem geysilegt flog,
margt hann fyllir af mörnum trog,
maðurinn kann í íslensku já, já og og.
(Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:62)

[The Dane and the damned one at Deep Voe;
by the surging sea has wealth to show,
from predatory pricing and scales unsound;
better a noose around his neck were wound.
The people to curse and swear he'd start,
anger like a sickness consumes his heart;
fills many a trough with fatty meat by hand,
in Icelandic he knows only "Yes, yes," and "and."

Another example is "Söngurinn í Úlfstaðakór" [The song in the choir at Úlfstaðir] (Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:52–53), in which each line also ends on a single stressed syllable, thereby lending additional emphasis to the rhyme. In another verse attributed to Stefán

internal rhyme is deployed with such exuberant ingenuity that the poem's meaning is far from clear:²⁷

Fýstust gestir fast að slást af þjósti,
fékk nú rekkur hnekkir ekki þekkan,
datt þá hrotti en dráttur þeyttist pretta,
dauða nauðin bauð heim snauðum kauða,
kvalinn rólar, kvelur bölið gála,
kveinar, veinar, reynir Stein með fleini,
flatur, látinn fóta ei notið getur,
flóði blóð af rjóðum, sjóða góði.
(Stefán Ólafsson 1886, 2:132)

[In their fierce fury folk were up for the fight,
with brutal blow one bloke is brought low,
the big buffoon then buckled, bother lurked,
the lummock was leading death to lunch;
pain-filled he falls, a floosie causes chaos,
whines, wails, assails Steinn with an arrow;
flat, the dead one cannot use his feet,
red blood flowed from ruddy treasure.]

Conclusion

Stefán Ólafsson was well respected in Icelandic society as a scholar, pastor and poet. As such he saw fit to amuse himself by composing verse that always achieved its aims without breaking the bounds of what was permissible. Along with his sober and respectable verse Stefán also wrote poems that inverted decorum and highlighted the squalid and disagreeable, all with the aim of amusing and admonishing. But what sort of people felt able to laugh along with Stefán? Certainly those who shared his background and education could appreciate his poetry, while ordinary folk may have regarded the clerical poet with a certain nervous respect. We should not forget that many of Stefán's poems enjoyed widespread popularity and

27. The verse is preserved in ÍB 734 8vo, the so-called *Stokkabláðabók*, one of the most comprehensive collections of Stefán Ólafsson's verse; the manuscript is the only witness for some pieces (Jón Þorkelsson 1886a, vii).

survive in numerous manuscript copies, with some of them sung in households for generations on end, as archival recordings in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík confirm.

Stefán Ólafsson and Magnús Ólafsson were two of the most learned Icelanders of their day, and their knowledge extended to classical and Norse, European and Icelandic works. Magnús was a good friend of Ole Worm and corresponded with him, and in turn Worm was Stefán's private teacher during his Copenhagen years. Hallgrímur Pétursson's education clearly did not rise to such levels, though to some extent he made up for this later through self-education, and these efforts served him well, for in 1663 we find Bishop Brynjólfur seeking out his help in understanding skaldic verses, as we will see presently. This was four years after Stefán had secured the services of an assistant cleric, an initiative that has been seen as indicative of his fragile health, partly as a result of depression. Hallgrímur's *Passíusálmar* were first printed in 1666, followed twenty years later by Kingo's *Vikusálmar*, in Stefán Ólafsson's translation. By this time Hallgrímur had been dead for several years, and Stefán's own days were numbered. Despite his more modest education and lower social status, it was Hallgrímur who enjoyed greater recognition as a poet during his lifetime and had more opportunities (or made better use of them) to promote his poetry. Though much of Hallgrímur's output is difficult to date, it seems clear that in his last years he placed greater emphasis on composing verse that secured official recognition and gradually became the most highly regarded poet of his day.

As a poet Stefán Ólafsson represents something of a contrast to Hallgrímur Pétursson. Born and brought up in a civil service family, he had every opportunity to develop as a poet and win recognition for his compositions. His literary gifts were self-evident and he was open to new ideas and foreign influences. He was a prolific poet and translator and a master of metrics and poetic language; and he developed an elegant style much admired by his contemporaries. Stefán's comic poems were certainly popular, otherwise he would not have composed so many of them; but there was never any question of their being printed, and not everyone warmed to their irreverence. Stefán may have devoted his later years to translating Kingo's hymns because he wanted to direct his talents to the service

of the official culture and achieve the recognition that had hitherto been lacking.

That said, Stefán Ólafsson's poetry, no less than that of Hallgrímur Pétursson, belongs unmistakably to the baroque period. Like most poets of their time, both men composed hymns and thus engaged with the most prestigious literary genre of their day. Unlike Hallgrímur, Stefán also composed the kind of Latin verse favored by other learned poets, while unlike Stefán, Hallgrímur composed *rímur* that were popular among ordinary folk. It is generally believed that Hallgrímur created his *rímur* as a young man, and before producing his greatest and most celebrated works; but we cannot be certain about this. It is tempting to believe that Stefán did not compose *rímur* because of his elevated social position, but in fact *rímur* poets came from all backgrounds. It may simply be that he found little to interest or excite him in *rímur* composition. Both poets wrote occasional verse, but Hallgrímur produced more commemorative pieces and occasional poems dedicated to his contemporaries than did Stefán. There is no doubt that the Christian faith lies at the heart of both poets' view of life. The uncertain rewards of the unstable world were their principal artistic concern, and both men saw poetry as a self-recommending medium for rebuking folly and promoting good order. Stefán's comic and satirical verse expresses a distinctively baroque social vision in which everyone and everything had its assigned place and where all attempts to alter that configuration represented the Devil's work. Love appears in a remarkable variety of forms in Stefán's serious and comic poetry, where we are reminded that seventeenth-century culture's most exalted, desirable and enviable elements rubbed shoulders with the base and the contemptible. In Stefán's writings vices and virtues, the unholy and holy, go together like darkness and light.